Hazel Brannon Smith: Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist

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Officers of the Federation of Mississippi Press Women, organized in 1947. Left to right: Mary Dawson Cain, *Summit Sun*; Hazel Brannon, *Durant News* and *Lexington Advertiser*; and Lois Anderson, *Ripley Sentinel*. 1948 photograph from the *Mississippi Press Association Records, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University*.
Larger view

Hazel Brannon Smith, in hat, at a Mississippi Press Association Convention in the early 1950s. *Mississippi Press Association Records, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University*.
Larger view

FEATURE STORY

Hazel Brannon Smith: Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist

Mark Newman

In May 1964 Hazel Brannon Smith, editor and publisher of the *Lexington Advertiser*, won a Pulitzer Prize for "steadfast adherence to her editorial duties in the face of great pressure and opposition" from the Holmes County Citizens' Council, which had formed in 1954, and from its segregationist supporters. The *Lexington Advertiser* served the small community of Lexington, Mississippi, the county seat of Holmes County. The council had begun a rival newspaper, the *Holmes County Herald*, in an attempt to drive her out of business, claiming she supported racial integration.

Yet Smith had once been an advocate of racial segregation who wrote "the south and America are a white man's country" and believed that interracial marriage was a sin against God. Although Smith did not publicly advocate racial integration, in the second half of the 1960s she worked closely with African American leaders. Her transformation occurred as her core commitments to Christianity, law and order, public education, and economic development increasingly conflicted with the attempt of leaders in both state and local governments to preserve white supremacy and segregation.

Southern belle

Born Hazel Brannon on February 4, 1914, in Alabama City, Alabama, her comfortable and Christian upbringing taught her values of respect and fairness in dealings with others, and a belief in law and order. Like her parents, she

Wedding of Hazel Brannon and Walter Dyer Smith, March 31, 1950. *Sid and Mildred Harris Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University*. Larger view

Hazel Brannon Smith, circa 1957. *Wilson F. "Bill" Minor Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University*. Larger view

Hazel Brannon Smith at podium,

unquestioningly accepted racial segregation, enforced by state law across the South, as part of the natural order.

After graduating with a journalism degree from the University of Alabama in 1935, Smith borrowed enough money to buy the *Durant News* in Holmes County, Mississippi, in 1936. She made the paper successful by reporting local news, including births, marriages, deaths, and graduations. Her warm personality, beauty, and intelligence made her popular in the white community. By 1940 Smith had paid off her loan and three years later purchased a second newspaper, the *Lexington Advertiser*.

She shared the segregationist beliefs of most whites in a county where African Americans formed at least 70 percent of the population. Smith argued that segregation suited both races and did not recognize that it unjustly confined African Americans to inferior status, education, and employment, and unfairly deprived them of voting rights. In July 1943 Smith wrote, "The white man and the black man have dwelt together in peace and harmony in the south for many, many years, because each has known his place and kept it. God must have intended for there to be a great colored race or he would not have created it."

However, Smith upset local law enforcement officers by condemning their tolerance of illegal gambling and bootlegging (the making, carrying, or selling of illegal liquor). Her pressure helped bring sixty-four organized crime indictments by a grand jury in April 1946. Six months later Smith was convicted of contempt of court for interviewing a black widow who gave evidence in the trial of five white men accused of killing her husband. Smith successfully overturned the conviction on appeal to the Mississippi Supreme Court.

Her newspapers remained popular, and their profits enabled her to live well and travel abroad. In March 1950 she married Walter Dyer Smith, a Pennsylvania ship's purser she had met on a cruise. The couple built a house, Hazelwood, in Lexington based on Tara from the film version of *Gone with the Wind*. Like many other whites in Holmes County, Smith condemned federal

with Mildred Planthold, during the 1971 Mississippi Press Women Convention. *Mississippi Media Professionals/Mississippi Press Women Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University*. Larger view

welfare policies and was a staunch anticommunist. She supported U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch-hunt in the early 1950s and demanded "an end to the coddling of Russia and the pinks and reds in our state department and practically every branch of our federal government" even if some innocent people were hurt.

Victim of the Citizens' Council

In May 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling declared segregated public schools, a system in which white children went to one school and black children to another, unconstitutional. Mississippi's white political leaders pledged lawful resistance to the ruling. Smith conceded that "The Supreme Court may be morally right when it says that 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,'" but she maintained that segregation would remain in place as both races "want it that way." Smith also wrote that all races "should have the same protection of the laws and courts," and called on Sheriff Richard F. Byrd to resign after he shot an African American man in the leg in July 1954 after ordering him to leave a roadside café for supposedly "whooping." The sheriff won $10,000 in a libel suit against Smith, but she successfully appealed the ruling to the Mississippi Supreme Court in November 1955.

Smith quietly refused to join the newly formed Holmes County Citizens' Council in the summer of 1954 because it advocated boycotting anyone who challenged racial discrimination. Smith subsequently angered the council by reporting the shooting and wounding of a black woman by a white man, after the woman had complained to the man about damaging her yard by turning his car around in it. Without naming the council, Smith objected to Citizens' Council pressure that eventually forced two men at the interracial Providence Cooperative Farm near Tchula to leave the county in 1956. The council successfully pressured many businesses not to advertise in her paper or give her commercial printing work, and it forced the Holmes County Community Hospital to fire her husband from his job as administrator in January 1956. The council organized the rival *Holmes County Herald* in November 1958. Smith responded by

publicly attacking the council.

Although Smith believed in states' rights, she argued that the federal government should take action after a grand jury failed to issue any indictments for murder after a white mob lynched Mack Parker in April 1959. Parker, an African American man, had been in an unguarded cell in Poplarville awaiting trial for rape.

Smith's editorials won her the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for courage in journalism in July 1960. The *Holmes County Herald* falsely wrote that she had been recognized for advocating integration, although she had reiterated her segregationist beliefs at the awards ceremony. In November 1960 a group of teenagers, including the son of a leading local Citizens' Council member, burned a cross on her lawn. After this, Smith became more outspoken in her condemnations of the Citizens' Councils and called for the abolition of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state agency she likened to "a Gestapo" for subsidizing the councils and gathering files on dissenters.

Smith's repeated denunciation of the Citizens' Council movement ensured the continuance of its campaign against her. Hodding Carter II, publisher of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, organized a fund-raising committee for Smith in July 1961 that raised money across the country but not enough to replace her lost advertising revenue from the business boycott instigated by the council.

In 1961 Smith conceded that segregation laws "by their very nature are discriminatory" and urged their repeal. She wrote "The intelligent Mississippi Negro is no happier under a system of forced segregation than are the white people of Mississippi under the threat of forced integration of the races. Somewhere in between the two 'forced' systems lies the answer." Smith continued to condemn violence against African Americans and civil rights activists, and in 1964 suggested that federal "occupation" might be needed to eliminate it.

Pulitzer Prize winner

After winning the Pulitzer Prize in May 1964,

Smith welcomed civil rights workers from the Mississippi Summer Project to Holmes County to begin a voter registration project, arguing that "These young people wouldn't be here if we had not largely ignored our responsibilities to our Negro citizens." Later that summer she entertained civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. as a house guest.

Smith no longer claimed to be a segregationist but neither did she advocate integration, although she endorsed the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 that outlawed segregation in public accommodations. In 1965 Smith argued that racial intermarriage, outlawed in the South, should be legalized. The African American community raised funds for her struggling newspaper, but she remained mired in debt having borrowed heavily. A black counter-boycott of white merchants failed to lift their boycott of her. In 1966 the county, with African Americans enfranchised by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, elected her to a federally funded antipoverty committee.

In May 1966 Smith condemned American involvement in Vietnam as an illegal war, and by 1967 she argued that it diverted money needed against poverty at home. Smith ran for the Mississippi Senate in August 1967, but lost in a runoff election by 4,264 votes to 6,616. In November, she supported local resident Robert Clark's election to the Mississippi House of Representatives, the first African American to serve in the state assembly since Reconstruction.

Twenty-three Lexington merchants finally agreed in December 1969 to advertise in the *Lexington Advertiser*, but Smith remained in debt. Although she won the Democratic nomination for the Mississippi Senate in 1971, Smith lost in the general election to a Republican by 9,644 votes to 13,667.

African Americans broke with her when she began criticizing their leadership for a black boycott of Lexington's white merchants in 1973 and accusing them of intimidating other African Americans. She remained unreconciled with whites. After her husband died in 1983, her health declined. More than $250,000 in debt, Smith filed for bankruptcy two weeks before

publishing the last edition of the *Lexington Advertiser* on September 19, 1985. Afflicted with the onset of Alzheimer's disease, she lost her way driving to the bankruptcy hearing. Her belongings and property were sold at auction.

Smith returned to Alabama to live with her sister before moving to a nursing home in Tennessee run by her niece. Smith won the Fannie Lou Hamer Award in 1993, collected for her by journalist Bill Minor at the ceremony at Jackson State University. Near death with cancer, Smith watched a partially fictionalized television movie about her life, *A Passion for Justice: The Hazel Brannon Smith Story*, made without the family's consultation or approval. She showed no response and died a few weeks later on May 14, 1994.

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